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Circus animals: Entertaining or inhumane?

Circus animals won't be performing in Minneapolis any more if a proposed ban passes the City Council.

By **John Reinan**, Star Tribune

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Lions and tigers and bears -- no way. And no elephants, either, if Minneapolis joins about two dozen cities nationwide in banning wild circus animals.

City Council members Ralph Remington and Cam Gordon say they hope to amend city laws to bar circuses from bringing elephants, tigers and other exotic critters into Minneapolis.

"It's adapting to the times and trying to be more humane in our treatment of wild animals," said Remington, who represents the 10th Ward. The proposed ban could be introduced later this month, said Remington.

He added that he believes he has the seven votes necessary to pass the measure.

The idea, part of a movement to get animals out of the Big Top, drew a roar from the circus business.

"I think it's one of the most un-American things I've ever heard of," said Rodney Huey, a spokesman for the Outdoor Amusement Business Association, which represents about 2,500 circuses, carnivals and other entertainment companies.

"If you are against animals working in a circus, then don't support it," Huey said. "But to keep a legitimate, traditional American business from coming to your town is ridiculous. You're denying thousands of children the right to see an elephant or a tiger in person."

Bans in other cities

Bans on circus animals have been enacted in a number of North American cities, including Stamford, Conn.; Boulder, Colo., and Burlington, Vt. But proposed bans have failed in several larger cities, including Seattle, Denver, Winnipeg and Edmonton, Alberta.

The circus industry has mounted an informational campaign to head off bans. Feld Entertainment, owner of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, has an extensive website with information on animal care. The site also includes an open letter to animal rights groups, accusing them of targeting well-cared-for circus animals while ignoring wild animals that are "starving, ill, overpopulating, and dying in habitats that can no longer support them."

Gordon said the proposed ban in Minneapolis is the result of a long-term lobbying effort by animal rights activists.

"It's arisen organically," said Gordon, who represents the Second Ward. "It is an issue coming from some active constituents and some people in my ward. But it's not a groundswell of people who are impatiently pounding on doors."

Among the circuses potentially affected would be the Minneapolis Shrine Circus, which is scheduled for the Target Center in mid-October. About 59,000 people attended the circus last year, said Don Wurden, potentate of the Zuhrah Shriners. Wurden declined to comment on the proposed ban.

It's unthinkable to have a circus without wild animals, said Tom Albert, a spokesman for Feld Entertainment.

"The fact is, people who come to the circus make it clear that the animals are the single biggest attraction," Albert said. "There may be activist groups, but our constituency is the millions of people who attend our circus and other circuses."

Those millions are watching tigers, elephants and other animals that have suffered inhumane treatment, said Nick Coughlin of Circus Reform Yes, a Minneapolis group that has pushed for the ban.

"You've got animals that are used to traveling 25 miles a day in the wild. Now they're tethered to chains 22 hours a day and forced to perform unnatural acts," Coughlin said.

"The tools of the trade tell the story. They use bullhooks, which are long, sharp rods with metal hooks. You've got hotshots -- electric prods -- whips and chains," Coughlin said. "These are the tools they use to train these animals to do these tricks."

Albert said modern training methods stress positive reinforcement.

"You don't get a reliable, predictable animal through mistreatment," he said. "We have every reason to take the best care of our animals. Our trainers live with the animals 24 hours a day."

Staff writer Terry Collins contributed to this report. John Reinan • 612-673-7402 • jreinan@startribune.com

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